

Girouard Avenue



Stephen Morrissey

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Stephen Morrissey



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To Patrick Morrissy, who emigrated
to Canada in 1837

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Montreal, an island, placed a cemetery atop its mountain,
capped that mountain with a giant illuminated cross and
wove streets along its slopes like a skirt spreading down to
the water. In this way, its ancestors hovered over the city
just as the Church did, and death was always at the center
of everything.

—Michel Basilières, *Black Bird*

Heaven is only won by supplication: when the ferryman
has reached his toll, the pale portal closes on the world
of shadows...

—Sextus Propertius, c. 50 B.C. – 15 B.C.

The Shade of Cornelia Consoles Her Husband

PROLOGUE: HOLY WELL

1. *The Ancient Well of Ara*

*There is a well in Tipperary
visited by my ancestors
before they left for Canada.
they said, "This is a place
of sleep and dreams—
drink from the well
and know the mystery
of life."*

*Looking down to the water
at the well's bottom,
they saw the reflected sky
the size and roundness
of a coin with the emblem
of a bird.*

*On Main Street
where the well
is located, not long
after ships left harbour
and famine crossed the land
a wooden top was fitted
to the ancient well,
the water cold and still
beneath the earth's surface.*

2. The Forgotten Spring

*In the big city, at the beginning
of a new millennium, in a park,
the corner of Doherty and Fielding,
where water gathers on the path,
asphalt lifted, broken,
a place always wet
as though it rained last night
although it didn't, with a seven story
apartment building on one corner
and low-cost apartments across the street,
where six young men stand and talk
on a Sunday morning in summer—
these are not the ancient fields
but a city park where water
rises on either side of a path
from an underground spring,
reminding us of what we used to know,
but have forgotten—the water
insistent, forceful, always desiring wholeness.*

GIROUARD AVENUE FLAT

Not for me this shroud of ashes.
—John Glassco, *Montreal*

One

I had forgotten
the dead
but they had not
forgotten me.

I had forgotten
myself as one of them.
Now I cannot avoid
the return of dreams,
the listening room
where I find
myself
most fully.

(November again
when dreams, urgent
with memories
and the dead, remind
me of their presence.)

I had forgotten
the season of dreams;
the days of the dead,
one for children,
one for adults.
I knew death as a child,
and so my soul knows
the finitude of things.

Now the soul demands its audience:
the return of dreams,
the dream of the dead
who come to me
with their insistence
and words: "Remember us,
do not forget us."

Two

I tried to piece together the remnants,
life become a reliquary, a Joseph Cornell box,

a strange puzzle of events
even as a child
I needed to hold together in my mind;

now I become
one with the past, the old ones
speaking through me:
poetry the voice of the soul.

We return to Girouard Avenue
walking down to 2226,
Grandmother's flat the center
of imagination:
 $2 + 2 + 2 + 6 = 12$
 $1 + 2 = 3$.
Three old women lived in the flat,
and before that, many people lived there;
I, too, lived there
when Father was too sick for Mother
to care for alone.

On Girouard Avenue

I lay in a pram looking up,
noticing Mother's dark hair—
now I walk down Girouard
and imagine having my photograph
taken in exactly the same place
as Father stood with me in a pram
beside him, remembering
other photographs taken on the back porch
with Mother and Grandmother.

But first we cross

Sherbrooke Street always busy with traffic,
past where Grandmother's finger
was caught in Uncle Alex's car door
one Sunday afternoon
and she, dragged along the street,
lost the tip of one finger;
passed where Grandmother shopped
and then her front door,
where the spirit resides
and memories converge
to form this poem.

Now, take me down the vista of years,

the push and shove of time and place,
where the present, past, and future merge
and temporality ends—and I am
suspended in time and thought:
I came to record
this life of odds, ends, death
and life, the Alpha and Omega
and whatever can be recorded,
what the soul remembers,
and loves:

When will the sleeper
awake from his night
of remembering?

He is cast down the vista
of years, snow falling
at Christmas.

The sleeper will awake
when the poem
is written

and the dead are no longer
disturbed by his call.

Three

February 28, 1965: Grandmother
with a bad cold.
Great Aunt Essie fell
on the floor, lay there
from 8:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m.
when Uncle Alex arrived.

March 7, 1965: Grandmother in hospital
hands bruised,
later to see Great Aunts Edna and Essie:
Edna: malnutrition;
Essie: bent over, deaf.

April 23, 1965: Grandmother died 8:15 p.m.
"Eighty-nine years old, she would have been ninety
next month" said my Aunt Ivy.

April 26, 1965: Grandmother's funeral.

April 27, 1965: my fifteenth birthday.

That first Christmas, the center
is gone; without Grandmother
there is no Christmas gathering
on Girouard. There is no center
holding the family together,
no woman who makes the family
whole. We need a woman's strength
and soul: without it, we are alone
and what is left is memory.

My brother and I
walked to the Girouard Avenue flat
on Christmas Day evening—quiet
of falling snow and deserted streets—
what Grandmother left behind,
a country cottage, cups and saucers,
a tea wagon, all of it means
nothing without her.

Eleven Christmas cards on the living room mantle.

We brought food for our Great Aunts
who stayed on in the flat,
living with Grandmother's things.
Edna had a cold.
Essie going blind.
We brought them groceries,
sat with them, fell
into the silence of years,
each second a space
separated by silence;

in each second the soul
remembers itself, responds
with listening, receptive
to the movement of time
slowed to the metabolism
of two old women, and I become
one with them, bent and weary
seeing through old eyes,
thoughts rubbed smooth
against the rock of experience
and know I am close to death.

It is not melancholy
or depression
but the realization
of the finitude
of all things—
furniture covered with
white sheets, the maroon
couch's springs
touching the floor—
a sheet music cabinet
containing 1920s songs—
in the dining room
an ancient gramophone,
steel needles in a tin box,
below, on shelves,
old Hollywood
scandal magazines
(the Vanderbilt's wild parties
in which men dressed in loin clothes
carry someone on a platform
above their shoulders,
faces painted eerily white).

Four

I know the silent resolve
of sitting alone, the sound
of time's slow movement;
my soul formed
by the presence of the old.

My brother and I visited
our two great aunts for three Christmases
after Grandmother's death;
each time walking through snow-covered streets,
snow falling, streets deserted
on Christmas evening
and I recorded, as always, what they said:

The history of Girouard Avenue flat
is the story of Grandmother.
She and her husband, Banty Morrissey,
moved there in 1927;
five years later my grandfather died
at Windsor Station where he worked,
he was a short, stout man who often said
"Let's not be sober";
Grandmother's father, Joseph Sweeney,
lived in the back room
after he was widowed;
Great Great Aunt Lib, Grandmother's aunt,
who had skin cancer on her face,
shared a room for a few years with Great Aunt Essie
after Aunt Lib's son moved to St. Louis.
Essie, Grandmother's sister, lived in a room
near the kitchen.
Aunt Mable, Grandmother's unmarried daughter,
had a room near the front door,
the room where I sat on Father's lap
and looked at cartoons

cut from The Saturday Evening Post.
Grandmother married at age nineteen,
gave birth to eight children:
Elsie, died aged thirteen;
Stella, also died young;
Mable, lived with Grandmother her whole life;
Herb, married with two children;
William, had an alcoholic son;
Alex, had one son who became a magician;
Frank, died in the 1930s;
Edgar, my father, had two sons—died age forty-two.

Five

It was Christmas as we walked
through the streets
eight months after Grandmother died,
my brother and I walking
through the snow to visit
two Great Aunts. When we left,
Edna wept, "Please
stay a little longer,
we're lonely."

And now I return to the comfort of memory,
the years of my life lie open before me:
I am seven years old
at Grandmother's flat,
walking passed rooms
opening off a dark hallway:
the bathroom with the claw foot
bathtub and window
too high to see out of;

Great Aunt Essie's bedroom;
then the kitchen where
Grandmother makes
my supper, pork chops
already cut into small pieces,
fried mashed potatoes and turnip.
It is winter and cold
outside, Aunt Mable
isn't home yet from work
at the Bank of Montreal downtown,
just Essie and Grandmother and I.
I drink a Coke, always the red
cardboard box containing six bottles
of Coca Cola on the floor
to the left as you enter the back room
off the kitchen, where
Grandmother's father lived
in his old age;
and for dessert
a lemon cake from Woolworth's
on Ste. Catherine Street,
bought by Mable
the previous Saturday.

O what has happened to us
my brother?
No Christmas walks
or any other
as we
grow older,
distant.
We were always
alone,
in separate
rooms.

O what has happened

to all of us?

Gone into a world

as foreigners
in a land

I barely recognize.

Six

I do not forget the days
I spent at Grandmother's
as a child after Father died;
one evening I carried Father's
attaché case with my overnight clothes in it,
on a bus going down Girouard
to Grandmother's flat,
the St. Lawrence River
in the distance,
yellow streetlights
reflected in the wet asphalt,
people in living rooms
watching television.

Then, later, sleeping on Grandmother's
maroon couch, the hall light left on
overnight. The next day
sunlight across polished floors,
and the smell of floor wax.

The days of childhood silence,
watching eleven streetcars
pass on Girouard
from the upstairs living room window
just before they stopped
streetcar service in Montreal;
that afternoon asking Grandmother
to play the piano, despite
the missing end of one finger,
and slowly she played
for a minute,
the rest of the tune
lost from her memory;
I listened
in awe and love.

Seven

They were poor,
too poor to have so many
children, but Grandmother
had nine siblings;
my great grandmother, Mary Callaghan,
had eleven children and nine siblings.
So Grandmother having eight children
was expected. Mary Callaghan
had three brothers in the priesthood:
Father James, who was kind and a dreamer;
Father Martin, the pastor at St. Patrick's;
and Father Luke, a Monsignor
and pastor at St. Michael's
for over thirty years;

Grandmother
went to the Monsignor
to borrow money,
but was refused.

And Elsie, my grandmother's first child,
died age thirteen in 1910; another daughter,
Stella, died age seven in 1905.
Both buried in Notre Dame de Neiges Cemetery
in relative's family plots—
few of the family dead have gravestones—

and I think of these girls, my aunts,
who never reached womanhood:
they slipped out of life
as easily as they entered.

Eight

Three years after Grandmother died,
visiting Uncle Alex in hospital,
this is what he told us:

"When I was a boy your father and your Uncle Herbie
were quarantined with scarlet fever, so I had to live
with your grandmother's parents on the next street.
One Friday night my grandfather wouldn't let me go out,
so I slipped out the back door and went home.
I tapped on the window and told
your grandmother what had happened.
She said to do as I was told,
and she would deal with her father later. She did.
She called her father a "bugger" and told him off;
after that Grandfather never liked me,
but he let me out Friday evenings."

"After school each day
I visited my grandmother.
She gave me crusty bread with sugar
and we sat in the parlour;
I whistled for her; she'd say,
'Oh Alex, you're such a good whistler,
you're such a good boy
to come and whistle for me,
what do you call your whistling?'"

"Your father and our brother Frank
were the smart ones. But Frank moved
with a fast set and drank; your father
loved to study, but the family needed money
and he had to quit St. Leo's Academy.
Frank, in his thirties, died of pneumonia."

Later that day, Mother recounted Father's death
in a Boston hospital in November 1956:
she and Aunt Dorothy stood by his bed;
a nurse held his wrist for a pulse.
Then Father said, "God damn it,"
his head shook a bit, and he was gone.

Nine

Three Christmases my brother and I visited
our Great Aunts, each year
walking through snowy streets:
along Monkland Avenue, then down Girouard,
passed Sherbrooke Street
until we reached 2226 Girouard Avenue.
Less and less Grandmother's presence
that made the flat

the center of coming and going,
for she was the feminine center
of the family and everyone in it.

Each November
the matters of the soul
announce themselves;
each November dreams
intrude at night,
reminding me of narrative
and history of ancestors
and spirits.

Why could my brother and I
never be close
as brothers are meant to be?
Why the distance?
I remind myself
of times we met on
common ground,
visiting our Great Aunts,
an ancient small wreath on the front door,
faded red cloth,
the smell of dust in the stairwell,
two old women, lonely
and in ill health.

You can change little
perhaps make amends,
learn if one is willing.

In November each year
the unconscious intrudes
in daily life; in dreams,
death, or other announcements
from the halls of mortality
in which are written
the poems of being,
where the net of being
gathers the lost,
the dead still active in dreams.

Ten

Ethel May Sweeney,
my Great Aunt Essie,
died July 25, 1968,
eighty-three years old,
senile and deaf,
almost blind;
she paid only \$15.00 a month rent,
when Grandmother was alive,
always a point of contention
with Aunt Mable; always speculation
how much money Essie
had hoarded away
all those years.
But in her purse
after she died, only
\$100.00 in various bills.

Girouard Avenue flat evacuated.

Edna Sweeney Taylor,
died January 23, 1970,
seventy-eight years old;
her last year and a half
in an old person's home
in Ontario.
Buried in Montreal.

Eleven

Let us not speak ill
of the dead,
they have their insistence
and to analyze the past
with fault in mind,
all one finds is fault
and guilt—let us not
speak ill of the living
or the dead
but ask forgiveness
where needed.

Grandmother sat in the captain's
chair in a summer cottage
in St. Eustache,
a chair I inherited
after her death:
chair arms
as her arms
around me;
she was both captain of the family

and mother, the Grand Mother
as we descend a genealogical tree,
roots and soil taking us deeper
to the earth's center, the core
of existence and heat of life,
back thirty, then sixty, then
multiples of years distant
in time, a gyre turning
and turning returning
us to lands our
ancestors came from.

Find in the human heart
forgiveness; we're all caught
in the net of being;
we're all survivors,
after centuries of war, famine,
the greyness of days
and darkness of nights;
the most difficult thing
compassion for all,
the impracticality
of any other course.

Twelve

I open the unconscious
with a crowbar,
not intent on self-improvement
but on revelation.

I read old diaries
and papers,

guided by dreams,

I listen to the poem,
for all poetry
is the voice of soul.

This has to do with matters of the heart,
with listening to the soul speak.

When will the sleeper
awake from his night
of remembering?

Eternity loves the temporal
through which it is manifested

and so this becomes
a poem of temporality.

Awake you sleepers
in quiet houses

you have slept long enough,
faces of the dead

pass before you—
it is their turn to dance,

it is their time to speak
of the soul,

light reflected on water

insects flying at the lighted window
at night.

Lower the dead into the ground
which is their final home,

snow glittering like stars
in late afternoon—

we love all existence
the dead know this

it is their dance:
in Mount Royal Cemetery
F.R. Scott's gravestone inscription
the dance is one.

O my soul
solitary in its night

know the dance is love
the only dance there is

is love.

HOOLAHAN'S FLAT, OXFORD AVENUE

This is what they say, who were broken off from love:
However long we were loved, it was not long enough.

—Muriel Rukeyser, "Eighth Elegy, Children's Elegy"

One

Behind the flat
in the lane, where coal cinders

filled potholes, I made
a small garden in the dirt

beside the garage door;
it wasn't really a garden,

just dirt smoothed flat
and weeds arranged,

the kind of thing a child
makes, but quickly it became

a place again for garbage cans
placed there by Rolland, the janitor

of all Hoolahan's flats,
who fed coal to fifty furnaces

up and down two city blocks
of fourplexes, all brick buildings

looking the same
on Oxford and Harvard

streets where I grew up
in Montreal.

Two

I have traveled many miles
to reach home;

where does my soul journey
from here? Where does my soul

find the tree of wisdom?
Clouds seemed to follow me,

after staring at them,
as I ran down Oxford Avenue

on my way to school.
Be wary of horses pulling milk wagons

one woman's nose was bitten off
(an apocryphal story perhaps)

but what is true is Blackballs,
a boy whose ominous presence

was a fearful thing: he insisted
on escorting me to school,

unless I could avoid him.
I remember Harry's corner store

and Harry's son shooting at people
with a BB gun

from his second story bedroom window,
hitting a woman below; her angry husband

broke the gun in two, when the police
and a crowd gathered outside

after the boy surrendered.

Three

We moved to Oxford Avenue
when I was four—only doors away

from Father's brother, Uncle Herb;
the Nuttalls lived upstairs,

Audrey Keyes next door and across
the street my friend, Ica Shainblum.

We lived two years at Grandmother's flat
on Girouard Avenue, when Father

was too sick to stay
in the small apartment on Avonmore

with two young children—my parents
on a waiting list for their own flat,

after the war with shortages
in housing. Young soldiers

returned home, food rationing ended.
Then we moved to Hoolahan's flat,

with three bedrooms, hardwood floors,
oak doors, and a fireplace in the living room.

I played beneath the front gallery,
hid broken pieces of red plastic

between bricks and dug a hole
"to China" under the front stairs,

buried an old metal box.
I'd like to dig it up now,

retrieve whatever is left—which
can't be much—of those years,

most of it lost from memory.
In summer Father would sit outside

waiting for Mother to drive him
to work at Windsor Station,

while I played with Audrey Keyes—
always "let's pretend".

I lay in bed between my parents;
only once I ran down the hall

away from Father,
afraid of being punished

for something I had done.

Four

Grandmother and Aunt Mable
stayed with us in our flat

when Father, in a Boston hospital,
was dying. My brother joined Mother

staying at the Boston YWCA hotel.
At home, I prayed each night

that Father live—now I ask
when does grief end? When is one

finally healed of remembering
thoughts of what could have been?

"Don't abandon me," cries the child
in his solitary bed, praying to God:

"Please send Father home.
Please make him well."

We waited for news of Father
in November, with the cold streets

and autumn's short days, snow falling
early that year. Grandmother

sat in the living room
knowing already the grief

of her children dying—first
Elsie and Stella, now Edgar.

I lay alone in bed at night
the hall light left on

while I said my prayers;
Mother not there to tuck me in,

only prayers that Father come home;
Grandmother and Aunt Mable

sleeping in the room
across the hall.

Five

Mother, home from Boston,
announced Father's death;

these are moments weighing
in the heart as lead,

and the heart sinks
to the bottom of the lake

where it is immune to feeling,
only the dulled sound

of someone's voice or the slow
throb of my heart beating.

I fell into deep water
surrounded by darkness and cold—

O Father, the child weeps,
why have you deserted me?

As though his death
were my defeat;

as a child I sang
my single treble note:

alone, alone.

In my child's heart
I knew there was no return

to the way things
used to be; no return

to the days that are memory,
weighing heavy in the heart

the face I loved
disappearing into shadows.

Six

The teenaged girl Mother hired
to be at the flat

when my brother and I arrived home
from school, invited her friend over

and in mid-afternoon
drank themselves unconscious,

passed out on the living room floor.
When Mother returned from work,

overwhelmed by anger and distress,
she kicked the girl

where she lay on the floor,
then called the girl's parents.

After that the days grew darker
and winter arrived, no girl

to meet me when I returned home;
my brother in his room,

distant and absent,
except for fights between us:

"Here, eat this candy
from a boot," he said,

but it was dried dog turd
from the street.

He was Mother's helper
with groceries and accounts,

working as a part-time janitor
washing floors at a nearby apartment;

then cheated of his pay
so Mother's brother, Uncle John

had to intervene, demand
what my brother was owed.

Now I entered the darkness
of the flat alone, the front door key

attached by a foot of string
to a belt loop on my pants.

Watching television after school
I lay on the floor eating white bread

with Miracle Whip,
my feet on the hot radiator

to keep warm until Mother came home.
Late one afternoon my brother and I

ran barefoot into the snow-covered street
and raced back, seeing how long we could

endure the cold, back and forth we raced
knowing cold that turns to pain.

Once I lay in the snow
outside our flat,

stars clearly visible
in the dark winter sky; I wondered

where does the sky end?
Where are the outer limits of outer space,

the final conclusion of stars
distant and unknown to us?

Seven

The Keyes next door
adopted two children,

Bobby and Audrey.
Mr. Keyes played some part

in building St. Joseph's Oratory
which we explored as children,

overwhelmed by the smell of incense
and the heat of ten thousand burning candles;

in the darkness of the church
walls covered with crutches and canes

left by those healed
by Brother Andre, whose body

lay in a large black granite casket,
with messages and prayers folded into small

squares of paper and squeezed
between the cracks of the casket;

his heart in a red glass urn
illuminated from behind, while outside

penitents kneeled praying on each stair
taking hours to reach the church.

We played in Audrey's room,
always "let's pretend", until

she went to a private girl's school
and one day stood in garters and brown nylons

in her bedroom window. Then I rode
my bicycle with Ica Shainblum

wildly through the streets
eating French fries

in brown paper bags
from the Chalet Barbecue.

I drifted off inside myself,
a dreamer the teachers ignored.

Sometimes on a Saturday
I went downtown with Aunt Mable

and ate an early supper
at Woolworth's counter,

visited Grandmother with Uncle Alex
on Sunday afternoons.

Meanwhile, I failed grade two—
always staring out the window

imagining faces in the clouds,
and wishing I were home.

Eight

When I was nine years old
I awoke one morning from this nightmare:

two men came with a cage
to take me to the orphanage—

they waited at the back door,
grey painted stairs leading to the lane.

I then knew that life has no security,
no safety from loss and abandonment.

One evening, Mother said
she was leaving us, she packed her things

she went to the car
in the garage, but I was waiting

in the backseat. Mother's hat,
for Father's funeral,

bought at "Nathalie's" on Decarie
blew off her head

the winter after he died. I found
the hat in the snow,

and not knowing
whose it was, pulled off

the zircon decoration
and discarded the hat.

Shirley, until she married
my cousin Herb a year later,

lived with us; on a cold Christmas
my brother played his new

Everley Brothers record,
"Wake Up Little Susie".

One Saturday afternoon
Mother and I went downtown

and bought a new kitchen set,
chairs and table, and this seemed

to end the time of Father's death,
as Father was never mentioned again.

Everyday Mother drove to work;
I stood behind white curtains

at the living room window
watching until she was gone

from view, then waited
a half hour before walking to school.

Uncle Herb and Aunt Dorothy's
lived next door

but when my cousin Linda
graduated from high school

my brother and I stood
on the sidewalk and watched,

not invited to the family party.
Aunt Dorothy's flat,

which I visited only once,
had all modern furniture,

the living room for adults only.
Once, I delivered something

to her door; she answered
dressed only in a towel,

and I saw her naked back
as she ran down the hall

holding the towel in front.
Some Friday nights I'd go downtown

to Eaton's Department Store
on Ste. Catherine Street

to see the first RCA colour televisions,
a huge wooden console costing

around \$1,900 in 1959—I'd watch
the NBC peacock open its multi-coloured

tail. One night when I was six or seven
I stayed at Grandmother's flat

and lay on the kitchen floor,
trying to see up Great Aunt Essie's dress,

there were holes in her baggy drawers.
One Christmas we returned home

late from Grandmother's
and I opened my presents alone

before bed, a cardboard container
of wooden interlocking logs

to make little cabins. Meanwhile,
my brother made gunpowder

setting off small bombs
in model airplane bottles

in the lane, one exploded
leaving glass in his back

and the days of bomb building ended.

Nine

My bedroom at Hoolahan's flat
was Father's old den; after

he was gone I slept
with the hall light on,

kept my room in order
the bed always made,

fell asleep
at my child's roll top desk,

writing stories at night.
Here I was close to Father,

close to what was left of him:
his papers from the C.P.R.

on the top shelf of the cupboard,
expense accounts, business

letters, and old 78 rpm records
from the 1940s. I would examine

these papers
as a map to lost treasure

or ancient manuscript;
the banality of the papers

did not matter, to hold them
was to be with Father,

and there was always
something interesting

in the papers: blueprints
to our country cottage in St. Eustache;

whole areas of our family's life
foreign to me, from before

my birth. As a child
I decided I would be like Father,

file away what I wrote,
poems and diaries. I wanted

to remember as much as possible,
keep an accurate record against time.

I became an archivist of memory,
an archeologist of the soul.

NOVEMBER

... a damp, drizzly November in my soul ...

—Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*

One: A Day in 1956

When Father went to Boston
he made his journey
on an overnight train,
arriving the next morning;
this was his dark night,
the soul's journey
of dream and memory.

When Father left
days ended in early darkness,
trees stark without foliage,
police car sirens could be heard
blocks away, cars and streetcars
advancing along Sherbrooke Street:
a cortege of black cars
waited beside Collins Funeral Home.
The sun made its dismal retreat
behind bare trees or an empty building.
When Father left,
silence, like a black horse,
seemed to follow the car
in which he drove to the train station,
and the ancient gods were awakened.

I stood by the window
and watched him disappear,
as I wait still for his
or someone else's overdue return.

This was Father's final journey.
He left Montreal for the hospital
in a foreign city. Seagulls behind
the train pulling out
of Montreal West Station.

He wrote a diary,
in shorthand, mostly illegible,
the few passages I could read
listing when he arrived,
medication, pain, injections,
blood and urine tests,
doctor and pastor visits:

October 28-29, 1956

*10:30 p.m., C.P.R. train no. 210,
a double bedroom "D" in car 210A,
an uneventful journey, arrived Boston (October 29)
North Station on time at 8:35 a.m.
Taxi to Pioneer YWCA where sat in lobby until 1:50 p.m.,
when left for Peter Bent Brigham Hospital.
Admitting preliminaries handled and assigned
semi-private accommodation, room 6.
Medical history conveyed to Dr....
following which thorough examination made.
Ammonium chloride and sample urine furnished.
No other tests made on Monday.
Went to sleep at 10:00 p.m.*

Dear Lord, help us
who are left behind,
bereft and forlorn.

Two: A Day in 1963

When I was young
Mother married a wealthy man.
He had been to private schools,
belonged to the social class
of wealth, breeding, and accomplishment
—grey flannel trousers, a blue blazer
with a school crest on the left breast pocket.
His intention was to send me
to a private school, like him.
So off I went one day for testing,
admittance based on my IQ
and ability to do math.
Was I, of Irish Catholic
and northern English descent,
fit to wear the school tie
of a Westmount private school?

I was not prepared for much that day,
fearful and disinterested,
sitting with other boys
of greater ambition,
trying to figure out impossible equations
in a dismal, half-empty classroom.
The rich of Westmount
looked down on all of us—
French and English-speaking alike—
they had money to prove their worth.
But I remember the French boy
at summer camp, just a few months
later, finding a photograph
of the Queen of England
in an old newspaper as we lit

a camp fire, stabbing the photo
with a hunting knife,
and I was bewildered
by his vehemence,
not understanding how the Queen
had much to do with Canada.
That was the year
the F.L.Q. placed bombs
in mail boxes, one exploding
near a Westmount school.
The old order
could not resist the new,
now only a shell is left
of old and new; and everywhere
people blame their defeat
on anybody but themselves.

Three: October-November 1970

Quebec is in grave trouble. Therefore Canada also is in trouble.
—F.R. Scott, *Gazette*, October 24, 1970

The year of the War Measure's Act,
soldiers stood on Westmount street corners
and I rode a city bus
to university downtown,
watching from the window
grey snowy streets, dull winter sky—
I was more a boy than a man.
What did I know of life?

Not much, it seems,
I lived like one
who had fallen in freezing water,
my body numb and stiff.

Almost to the day the year before,
my stepfather died in hospital.
No wonder I saw everything
in greys and monotones,
that's all I knew.
That year—the year after he died—
troops in the streets,
and over our house
helicopters flew in formation.
We thought they were taking the terrorists
to an airport and then Cuba,
a deal to end the kidnapping.
These men had kidnapped
an innocent man, James Cross,
a British diplomat,
and killed Pierre Laporte,
a Quebec cabinet minister,
abducted from a quiet suburban street
while playing ball with his children.
His body was found, strangled
with chain and cross he wore,
in a car trunk not far
from his home. Now the army
patrolled city streets,
stood guard outside politician's homes.
There was enough division and loss
in my life without adding the loss of country,
loss of order, loss of peace.

The War Measures ended,
politicians' departed
the old order declined
and what was new
is now old,
and what had promise
now seems naïve.

Four: A Month in 1976

When I left Quebec
for a month in California,
all I could talk about
when I arrived
was politics at home—
few can understand
the place I come from,
a place of contradiction
and dispute: of both
politeness and kindness
and the aggressive
motorist who speeds up
when he sees someone
crossing the street.

A place rank with division
and dissembling,
the past remembered selectively
to divide people.

I was twenty-six years old
and did not want to return here,
to the politics and separatists.
Stopping in Vancouver
on the flight home
I left the airport
on a mild April day,
trees in blossom
and mountains
in the distance;
hours later in Montreal,
grey sky, dirty snow,
freezing weather.

Families put down roots,
almost impossible to tear up
from frozen steel-hard ground.
I carry in me
this place; I know
so many streets and buildings
each with an anecdote
of familiarity like a friend.
But can I ever be happy here?
Insularity and division
seem to emanate from
the ground like poison gas,
or descend miasma-like
on anyone living here
under this configuration
of stars and distant
planets:

*oh dismal haunted streets,
cobblestones or paved,*

*with store window reflections
and shadows, walking into icy wind.*

Five: An Afternoon in Old Montreal

I tour the oldest building in Montreal,
built in 1685 and visit the cellars
of Le Seminaire de St-Sulpice
dug three hundred years ago
into the depths of the earth
thirty feet beneath rue Notre Dame.

Wooden vegetable bins in the first cellar,
an opening in the stone wall
where fruit and vegetables
came down a chute
then placed on shelves,
only dust there now.

Along a tunnel the wine cellar,
empty bottles stacked on their sides,
and in the middle of the floor
a dry well covered with wood planks
and a hole in the ceiling closed now
where from the kitchen upstairs
buckets were lowered for water.

Then a corridor and single file
down narrow stone stairs
to the deepest cellar,
where iron hooks for meat
protrude from the ceiling.
Here, the same cold temperature
is maintained winter and summer,
for we are thirty feet or more
beneath the upper world we've left behind—
and there is the romance
of the past, seductive for any visitor,
to return to what is old and nostalgic;
but in our modern
world, none of this matters
as much as it once did.
Down here, we're even below the dead,
who would know the world of commerce
is above our heads, the Bank of Montreal,
the National Bank of Canada?

Buildings surround Place D'Armes
where in still earlier times
another old church once stood,
demolished for Notre Dame Basilica,
and we are shown a doorway—
sealed with cement and field stones—
that once lead underground to the other church.
Time is stratified like rock,
each generation a layer of experience
on top of the past: I listen to voices of the past
so distant, like echoes in a cave,
like figures moving at night
through these city streets.

Six: An Evening in Old Montreal

We have time to grow old. The air is full of our cries.
—Samuel Beckett

After seeing *Waiting For Godot*
we entered the November night
outside the Centaur Theatre,
cobblestone streets
under dim yellow lamp light.
Walking up to rue Notre Dame
I remember time spent waiting,
Sundays cleaning the house,
until late winter afternoon in darkness
when I could eat an early supper,
plate of food on my lap, watching TV.
I think of the centaur, Chiron,
half horse, half man;
he, too, was once wounded,
the mythological healer.

We have consumed in excess
the things of our age:
now, as though punished,
we are visited by earthquakes,
hurricanes, floods, an ice storm
that breaks telephone poles;
apple orchards are covered
by three inches of ice,
fields once alive with birds
and animals are asleep or at least
caught in suspended animation.

Endless winter? Or a landscape fallen
into silence? A bough heavy with ice
breaks from a limb,
tree trunks split open,
vulnerable and exposed.
When I was young,
my life had order I didn't question:
then I fell into years of unhappiness,
a spiraling vertigo. I struggled
with what the soul became,
stripping away the old, asserting the new.
Not knowing what I waited for
I wore a nervous expression,
lost and self-conscious,
now I am too old for the *angst*
of the past. Black birds circle
in the white winter sky,
a reminder of my finite self.

Seven: An Evening in 1957

We counted boxcars that summer
at Old Orchard Beach, the first
after Father's death, in a rented cottage
across a dusty highway and a field
from the train tracks.
You could see freight trains pass
in the evening's golden sunlight,
90, 100, 120, sometimes 140 box cars,
moving tiny and distant
on the horizon, each filled
with television sets, boxes of band-aids,
chairs, stoves, and clothing,

all of it used and discarded
in the half century
since my brother and I watched them pass
before going inside and listening
to radio dramas and falling asleep.
We didn't think then how much
the years ahead, and now behind us,
are like the boxcars we counted:
a child's pastime, not thinking
the train would end and silence follow
as the fields turn dark and cold at night.

Eight: Father Martin Callaghan

I walked down the wooden stairs
at the Grand Seminaire
to the crypt where Father Martin Callaghan
was buried in 1915,
following a young priest
to a large rectangular-shaped room,
cement aisle down the middle
and crosses in bare earth.

Is this where psyche leads me,
to the grave of Father Martin,
a great great uncle,
born in November 1846,
the oldest of nine children
from parents born in Ireland.
He was the first Montreal-born pastor
of St. Patrick's Church;
he played violin Saturday evenings

on a Chinatown street corner,
always aiming for converts
an evangelist who converted
over three thousand people.

"We are here to celebrate a life,"
a priest said at Nick Auf der Maur's
funeral at St. Patrick's Basilica.
Then a Dixieland Band lead a procession
to Crescent Street, to the bars
where journalist Auf der Maur was famous.
I sat in the balcony at St. Patrick's
imagining Father Martin was
conducting the funeral service,
hoping to find something
of Father Martin, something
of the thirty years he spent
at St. Patrick's: Father Martin officiated
at the funeral of Sir William Hales Hingston,
a senator and former mayor of Montreal,
Hingston's funeral the biggest in the church
since Thomas D'Arcy McGee's funeral in 1868.

Now, in the crypt
at the Grand Seminaire,
I stand in front of Father Martin's grave:

*let the body rest,
let the soul and mind
and spirit find rest and peace.*

I remember an old priest
at the Grand Seminaire, after
leaving the crypt, telling us
that bodies are disinterred
after fifty years, and anything left
is placed in an urn
at the opposite end of the crypt.
What is left after fifty years?

In drizzly grey November days
and early evenings, darkness barely
dispelled under yellow street light,
the presence of spirits surround me—
I can feel them brush against
my arm and shoulder, the ones who come
uninvited, insistent, and reminding
of the past.

Nine: Windsor Station

Beats all creation, the new C.P.R. station
--

—Sir William Van Horne, President of the
Canadian Pacific Railway, whose words appeared
on a banner at the 1889 opening of Windsor Station

In Windsor Station
a statue of an angel stood,
“Winged Victory” by
Coeur-de-Lion MacCarthy.

Wings out-spread,
and in his arms a soldier
who fell in war,
the two ascending
to heaven.

The railroad's head office
was moved out west;
the station concourse—
once busy with arrivals
and departures—now used
as a banquet hall,
but the angel remains:
Another statue, this one
of Sir William Van Horne,
bronze and immovable,
sitting larger
than life in the lobby
where you enter
from La Gauchetierre Street.
He was President of the Canadian
Pacific Railway.

Ten: Waiting for trains

Those first years after Father died
when we rented a summer cottage
across the street from Grandmother's,
I would wait late afternoons
at the St. Eustache Station
for Mother to arrive by commuter train
from work in the city.

Windsor station concourse mostly empty now
beneath a half-empty building, of grey rusticated
stone walls. Upstairs the offices
where Father worked and Mother worked
after Father died. That January in 1957
we took the train to visit relatives,
leaving from Windsor Station
our bags on the rack above our seats,
so when we arrived they were lifted down
and then the visit with Mother's cousins.
This was a few months after Father died,
and in the photograph of my brother
and I in the falling snow
at the side door to the stucco house
on Railway Avenue,
my brother looks at the camera
in despair and grief;
I, younger than my brother,
stand to his right,
smiling and happy as though
nothing happened.

Town and city, rural and urban,
we were connected by the railway,
rails crossing and re-crossing the land—
silver and blinding in the noon sun.
In memory, I enter a station, dreamlike and distant,
and see what seems to be myself,
waiting for someone to arrive,
looking worried and self-conscious.
I've grieved so long, it's become
a way of life, a pattern of thought—
now let the dead take care of themselves.

Eleven: O, Conductor

Conductor, has the train arrived,
have passengers already disembarked?
The train is carrying the body
of Thomas D'Arcy McGee,
a Father of Confederation,
assassinated the previous night
by Patrick Whelan,

who supported a Fenian invasion
of Canada, opposed by McGee.

Another train is carrying home
Prime Minister Trudeau's body
after it rested in state in Parliament;
yet another train will return us home—
across a bridge over cold black water.

O Conductor, has the train arrived?
Has Grandmother disembarked? Has Father
disembarked? Or their ghosts, like shadows
of who they were when I was a child.
Conductor, I am hungry,
I want to sit at the dining car's
festive table,
stirling silver flat ware
in rows on either side of a china plate
decorated with a beaver
sitting on top of the C.P.R.'s globe emblem
and the words "We Span the World."

Twelve: The Summing-up

After wo I rede us to be merie.

—Chaucer, “Knight’s Tale”

My life isn’t quite
an open book,
but I stand behind
what I’ve done—
I did what I had to do
to survive. I thought
survival was enough
but it leads to stasis,
and denial of transformation;
I thought redemption
lay in confession,
but it can lead to
self-absorption,
or strengths beyond
what others know.

The beginning of wisdom
is in the love of God,
but some people
have to wait a long time
before they learn anything.
I am like the body of a man
found preserved in a bog—
he was removed
from his thousand year long
rest, both legs broken
so his spirit couldn’t return
at night to haunt the living
—his wrists
tied with rope
braided from straw.

My legs aren't broken
but something kept me here
long after others fled this place.
My hands aren't tied
behind my back,
but I carry the burden
of my parent's life,
unconscious, unaware,
and deflected onto me
to examine. I've lived
on the end of strings,
controlled by obligations,
duty, responsibility
and a rigid sense
of who I am.

In early November
in my fiftieth year,
I lie in bed
by the open window,
sunlight illuminating
autumn's yellow leaves;
ivy around the window
while in the yard
the single apple tree
still hasn't lost its leaves.
The complexity
of every leaf,
vein and fibre;
sunlight traveling
millions of miles
before casting long shadows
across the yard.

Then there is the flight
of birds across a blue sky,
as though synchronized
with the flight of other birds
or the rustling of leaves.
Insects move silently
in the dark soil;
I think of the human heart
and soul, the intricacies
of blood and life,
bone and thought,
brain and muscle.
I am in awe
of all creation,
and love God
as I did when a child.

THE ROCK, OR A SHORT HISTORY OF THE IRISH IN MONTREAL

1.

Isaac Weld, from Dublin
writes of Montreal in 1796,
the houses in lower town
were gloomy, reminding him
of jail.

According to E.A. Talbot's
comments on Montreal in 1820:
"The whole city appears
as one vast prison..."
Grey stone churches,
endless rows of two storied
brick buildings,
and dreary November days
already dark at 4 p.m.

2.

Typhus among Irish famine victims
arriving by ship in 1847-48.
The rich live on Mount Royal—
who A.R.M. Lower described as living
"comfortable and smugly...
in their devotion to their duty,
to the tribal instincts,
and to ensure status
as the measure of all things."

The poor, as ever, occupying
the city below the hill.

What remains today of Griffintown
where houses once stood
front doors opening directly
to the sidewalk, in the English
manner of a worker's house—
now empty lots, factories, parking lots
for trucks; Leo Leonard's horse stable,
the smell of manure and a barking dog;
and the triangular shaped lot
now a park with the excavated stone foundation
of St. Ann's Church, 1854 to 1974;
an archaeological site, St. Ann's
where Father James Callaghan served
as parish priest in 1874
before joining his brother
Father Martin Callaghan
at St. Patrick's Church,
thirty years before
Father Martin was found
too lower class
for Montreal's up and coming Irish.

3.

Ireland became
an island of famine,
so the occupants took flight
in ships, brigs, and barks;
weighed anchor,
return impossible;

the dying
lay on straw

mattresses
in fever sheds;

many died, including
Mayor John Easton Mills.

Catholic and Anglican
clergy administered

to the sick;
three rows

of seven sheds
between Bridge

and Riverside Street
south of Britania;

five thousand died,
buried in crude coffins

made from planks,
the majority buried

in common lime pits.
All commercial

and social activity
ended, 44° Celcius

on July 7, the height
of the epidemic,

by July 22, 3,500 people
lay dying in the fever sheds.

4.

Of what was called Goose Village
nothing remains:
'the immigrants' old burial ground'
and Windmill Point where fever sheds were erected,
a burial ground after 1847.

The Black Stone
dredged from the bottom of the St. Lawrence River
by workers constructing the Victoria Bridge,
who placed it in commemoration
of where they discovered the remains of the 5,000 dead Irish,
bones wrapped in cloth; bone and flesh the outer garment
of soul and spirit:

We Preserve from Desecration
The Remains of 5000 Immigrants
Who died of Ship Fever
A.D. 1847 – 1848

This Stone
Is Erected by the Workmen
of
Mess. Peto, Brassey & Betts.
Employed in the Construction
of the
Victoria Bridge
A.D. 1859

5.

These are the months of winter in Montreal:
October 31, the first snow fall on Halloween,
slush in the streets for a few days before melting;
all of November into December,
children arriving home from school in darkness;
January and February, earth frozen
hard as rock, glare of sunlight, harsh blue sky;
a few more sparrows
gather at the back door;
March, when spring does not arrive;
April's feeble spring days;
May growing out of April,
spring lasts a week
before summer
and sudden intense heat.

6.

In Goose Village, in Griffintown,
did those who arrived before the famine
look from their windows, the fever sheds nearby—
consider people like themselves
came 4,000 miles to die?

Mary Callaghan,
at 45 Hermine Avenue
from 1884 to 1892,
walked up St. Alexander
to St. Patrick's Church
where her brothers Martin and James
were parish priests.

Mary's husband, Thomas Morrissey,
worked as a brass finisher
at the Robert Mitchell Company;
retired in 1905; Saturday mornings
his grand-daughter Mable
collected his pension check.

Daniel Sweeney, a tailor employed
at a shop on Ste. Catherine Street and Bleury,
lived at 22 Hermine during the 1840s;
in fifty years his grand-daughter would marry
Mary and Thomas's son.

Thomas's father, Laurence, lived
on Vallée Street for half his life,
although at various addresses.
In 1866 a letter arrived
from Laurence's nephew William
in Newcastle, New Brunswick
asking him to visit there,
his family missed him.
Later, William practised medicine
in Brooklyn, New York,
where he died in 1898;
Rosemary, his daughter,
died in childbirth in 1909.

7.

I join the others
for the march to the Black Stone
—from St. Gabriel's Church
in Point St. Charles,
to Bridge Street—

we walk passed empty lots,
the Maple Leaf packing plant
and abattoir, now closed.

The police secure streets
allowing the procession
to pass, about a hundred
people against rain and time;
there are no names on this mass grave
there's a little of all of us buried here,
beneath a four lane road divided by the Black Stone,
pipes, sewers, weeds and wild grass
in the asphalt cracks and adjacent empty lot.

Then a representative of the Irish government
makes a short speech on peace in Northern Ireland,
and the return walk back to St. Gabriel's. Our home
is not Ireland, it is here in Montreal
where we have buried our dead,
the grave of father and grandfather,
great grandfather and great great grandfather.

Ancestors, history, spirit, who we are
and what we've become:
bone wrapped with flesh and muscle;
spirit in body, names in stone.

EPILOGUE: THE COLOURS OF THE IRISH FLAG

Green

If I believed in death
I'd give up now,

the ground an envelope
in which our bodies will lie

until our souls are sent
to heaven, hell, or nowhere at all—

*we did not meet
to be torn apart so soon,*

that is the cry of lovers
heard across a green field.

If love is not for
a dozen lives to come,

the infinity of time unfolding,
the sky darkening over fields,

each moment a green
eternity celebrating love...

in an ancient manuscript,
two lovers drawn in the margin

and our names
placed side by side;

oh, hold me close
in the cold green dawn.

White

This is the sheet of paper,
a flag of surrender,

this is newly fallen snow
and we are walking across it,

a field with a few
straggly black trees

on the horizon
where a white

sky meets the white
field of snow—

and I am carrying
a white flag:

why a white flag?
why surrender?

I am not one
to surrender,

I am one to fight,
struggle, wave the flag

with its green
white and orange.

Now we are arriving
in the new world;

ships full
of quarantined men,

women and children
wait off Grosse Ile;

they have not surrendered
in their flight

from famine;
they have not traveled

five thousand miles
only to die

when they should
embrace a new life.

This is a white sheet of paper,
words scrawled on

the page become this poem:
I will not surrender,

the flag I carry
is for life and love.

Orange

When a man and woman marry
their tears become one,

tears of sorrow,
tears of joy;

without love
there is only

the growing distance
between sun and moon

until the earth
falls into darkness.

The sun is weak
when summer ends,

then, predictably, leaves fall
and days grow shorter.

Those who join in union
become two people sailing

on a wooden ship
into an orange sunset,

a million gold coins
dancing on the water's

surface, the gold light
disappears in minutes...

tears of sorrow,
tears of joy.

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About the Author

Stephen Morrissey is a sixth-generation Irish-Montrealer. Morrissey is the author of several books of poetry, including *Mapping the Soul: Selected Poems, 1978-1998*. In the 1990s, Morrissey published *The Shadow Trilogy*, with Empyrean Press, Montreal. The trilogy consisted of *The Compass*, *The Yoni Rocks*, and *The Mystic Beast*. In 2004, Les Editions Triptyque published *La bête mystique*, a French version of the *The Mystic Beast*, translated by Élisabeth Robert.

In the 1970s, Morrissey was a member of the Vehicule Poets, a group of young poets associated with Vehicule Art Gallery. The Vehicule Poets have continued to publish anthologies, including *The Vehicule Poets_Now*, which Morrissey co-edited with videopoet Tom Konyves.

As a graduate student, Morrissey studied with poet Louis Dudek at McGill University. While at McGill he was awarded the Peterson Memorial Prize in English Literature. The Government of Quebec has named an island in northern Quebec after a phrase from one of Morrissey's poems, *la vingt-septième lettre*.

Morrissey teaches Canadian Literature at Champlain College, Quebec. His literary papers are archived at the McLennan Library's Rare Books and Special Collections at McGill University. He has researched and published an online history of his family, **Patrick Morrissey and Mary Phelan: Some of their Descendants and Relatives in Canada** (www.morrisseyfamilyhistory.com). Stephen Morrissey is a member of The Writers' Union of Canada and League of Canadian Poets.

Visit his website: www.stephenmorrissey.ca

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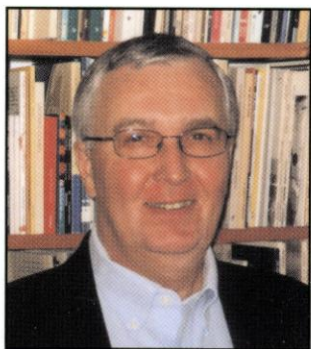
In *Girouard Avenue*, Stephen Morrissey has mapped out in time and place his own neighbourhood, as well as that of Montreal. The poet accurately portrays the individual ties he has to his brother, mother, grandmother, and aunts. He expresses a central sense of loss, as well as a recuperation of the essential qualities of his father. In elegiac poems, he defines these relationships through appropriate language, original imagery and strongly felt lines. Beyond his immediate family, Morrissey explores the lives of his ancestors, going back to Mary Callaghan, his great-grandmother; Father Martin Callaghan, the first Montreal-born pastor of Saint Patrick's Church; and Thomas Morrissey, a brass finisher—setting them in a larger historical context. In the final section, Morrissey expresses the tragedy of the Irish who died in the sheds of Griffintown in the 1840s, yet moves beyond it to a personal celebration of those who survived and helped build Montreal.

—Laurence Hutchman, author of *Reading the Water* (Black Moss, 2008)

Professor of English, University of Moncton, Edmundston, New Brunswick

Stephen Morrissey is a poet who writes with cadenced language, as he circles over his ongoing poetic themes: family; ancestors; a sense of history; geography and spirit of place; the legacy from one generation to the next. In this present collection, *Girouard Avenue*, Morrissey's eighth book of poetry, the poet travels outward, inward, back to the past, and forward to where he currently lives.

Girouard Avenue consists of four long poems, each in several parts, plus a prologue and epilogue poem. These long poems are each one a poetic *tour de force*, brilliantly eloquent in their evocation of the Montreal of Morrissey's childhood; the city of his Irish ancestors; and the present locale for the poet's sensibility. This highly evolved a poetry book only comes along every once in a while, in the canon of Canadian poetry.



Stephen Morrissey has an M.A. in literature from McGill University, where his literary papers are archived at the McLennan Library's Rare Books and Special Collections. Stephen Morrissey teaches Canadian Literature at Champlain College. One of the original Vehicule Poets, Morrissey has continued with his own writing, as well as reviewing, running two literary magazines, and publishing online chapbooks for other poets.



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